

# *The Historian*

*of Hancock County*

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*Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi*

*August 1995*

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## **LE MARIN FOR AUGUST**

Our August luncheon meeting will be held at noon on Thursday, August 17, at our 1995 Decorator Show Home at 406 N. Beach Blvd., Bay St. Louis.

Lunch, served in the rear patio of **Le Marin**, home of N. Carter Church and Yancy L. Pogue, will be \$5, with the tour of the home gratis for members.

The Home showing, for \$5 admission, is scheduled during the month of August each Thursday through Saturday from 10 a.m. until 3 p.m., and each Sunday from noon until 3 p.m. beginning August 10.

For luncheon reservations, call 467-4090. Reservations are not necessary for the Home tour.

## **A MICHAELANGELO UNDER THE BED**

A visit of the Vatican's pieta' by Michaelangelo to the 1964 World's Fair was heralded as the first visit of an original sculpture by the great Italian Renaissance artist to the United States. But, in 1947 another Michaelangelo pieta', stealthily carried to protect it from thieves, was brought to this country, the only place at the time believed to have art patrons

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This Carrara marble sculpture by Michaelangelo Buonarroti spent two days in Waveland in 1947



## (MICHAELANGELO

from page 1)

wealthy enough to pay the \$3 million price. Its owners, the citizens of Clermont-Ferrand, France, hoped to raise money to rebuild the town, left devastated and destitute by World War II.

In its brief sojourn in America, the sculpture, which depicts the fallen Christ in his Mother's arms, accompanied by Mary Magdalen and Nicodemus (whose face, as in many of Michaelangelo's works, is a self-portrait), arrived in Florida and traveled through Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana to its destination in Texas where it was presented to a number of wealthy art patrons and museums. No buyer was found, and the statute went east again where it was lodged in a bank vault in Alabama until the French Embassy fetched it and returned it to France. The good news had come that the town was receiving Marshall Plan funds to aid the restoration and did not need to sell its greatest treasure.

Entrusted with the task of transporting the statue and finding a buyer were Wendell and Bianca Howard, friends of Katherine "Kitty" Kearny Hacker, whose sister, Mrs. James M. Robert, owned a summer home on the beach in Waveland.

The Howards stopped in Waveland en route to Texas. Kearny Robert, now 81, who lives on Farrar Lane next to the site of his parents' summer home (destroyed in Hurricane Camille), remembers that visit well.

"I went to dinner with my parents and my Aunt Kitty, who died in 1994 at age 100, was there

with the Howards, her old friends," he said. "Aunt Kitty mentioned that the Howards brought with them a statue by Michaelangelo that they were commissioned to sell." It was brought out from the guest room where it had spent the night in its crate under a bed. Weeks later, on its return from Texas, the statue spent another night under the same bed in the Robert home.

The story of the pieta', restored to the cathedral at St. Alons, France, is one of mystery and intrigue.

About 30 inches high, the sculpture, of Carrara marble, was a studio model for a much larger work intended for the sepulchre of Lorenzo di Medici, patron of Michaelangelo Buonarroti of Florence. The full-sized statue is in the Cathedral St. Maria del Tiore in Florence, but all experts agree that it is cruder because it is unfinished. One theory is that Michaelangelo, dissatisfied with the work, destroyed it, only to have his students restore it. A number of experts have stated their belief that the model is superior to the larger statue.

Catherine di Medici, Lorenzo's granddaughter, watched Michaelangelo work in the artists' studio of her grandfather. When she left for France to wed the Duke d'Orleans, later Henry II of France, Michaelangelo presented her with the statue, which she installed in the private chapel of her Summer Palace at Clermont-Ferrand. Since the Medicis forbade the export of any work of Michaelangelo, the pieta' was smuggled out to Catherine under the robe of a Benedictine monk.

For some 200 years, the pieta' remained in Catherine's chapel. During the French Revolution, it was hidden deep in the recesses of St. Alyre Abbey at Clermont-Ferrand. It remained there until World War II. Once Hitler's army occupied France, the statue left Clermont-Ferrand and was hidden by priests in the small village of St. Alons in northern France. Hitler's minions searched in vain for the pieta' throughout the war.

The citizens of Clermont-Ferrand, owners of the statue, knew and trusted the Polish-born wife of the interned American, Wendell Howard. She had spent most of her childhood in St. Alons. During the war she was a Resistance Fighter with the French Underground. When Wendell was freed after the war, the pair settled in Pensacola, Florida. In 1947, they were commissioned by the citizens of Clermont-Ferrand to bring the statue to the States and find a buyer. There was no trouble importing the Michaelangelo since objects older than 100 years enter duty free, and Wendell Howard traveled under diplomatic immunity granted for the occasion.

From Florida, the Howards, together with Mrs. Hacker and Mrs. Robert, headed for Texas to show the statue, with a \$3 million price tag, to wealthy art patrons and museums. The sculpture was also seen by a pair of sophisticated thieves working for a dealer in stolen art works. They followed the statue from Texas back to the east, where the Michaelangelo was left in the vault of a Mobile bank.

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CIVIL WAR DAYS - HANCOCK COUNTY AND VICINITY  
COMPILED AND EDITED BY CLYDE CUCULLU  
MEMBER - HANCOCK COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Letter from Bay St. Louis

Bay St. Louis, Sept. 18

The ladies of our village a few evenings since treated us to a concert and a series of tableaux to provide winter clothing, etc., for our volunteers at the pass.

It was a delightful entertainment, and reflects the highest credit on the young and graceful performers. Madame Stockton generously provided the apartment, and Mr. Von Hope, a talented artist of your city, liberally contributed his assistance, and won the hearts of our whole community. He disdained any compensation on so patriotic occasion, and was above the meanness of chaffering for a fee when youth and beauty were exerting themselves to provide for the defenders of our country. The ladies realized \$120.

A similar entertainment will be given on the evening of the 24th inst., when your presence will be very acceptable to us all. Every lady is engaged in working for the soldiers.

We have two splendid Companies, Capts. Eager and Deason at the Pass, and another commanded by our Sheriff Napoleon Monet, Esq. has just been mustered in. Another one is organizing in the northern part of our county.

Pretty well isn't it, for a community that owns few slaves, has few plantations to desolate, and only casts two or three hundred votes? We have, besides, a Home Guard, commanded by Evariste Saucier, Esq., well known in commercial circles in your city.

But we are in want, all along the Coast, of batteries and artillery. What energy can do, Gen. Dahlgren will accomplish, but there has been, in some quarter, deplorable neglect. Your columns have been full of warning, but we have slept on our posts until the seizure of Hatteras has taught us our danger.

The approaching election is exciting some interest. Hon. John J. McRae will receive a unanimous vote for Congress. Madison McAfee will be voted for for Governor by nine-tenths of the sea-shore district.

CITIZEN

Source: "Daily Picayune" N. O. - September 21, 1861







(MICHAELANGELO  
from page 2)

The French Embassy had by then contacted the Howards asking that the statue be returned, since Marshall Plan money was available. A courier was dispatched from Washington to fetch the statue. He went to the bank with an empty traveling case, but left the bank with a full one. Rather than the statue, however, the case contained the many documents that accompanied it. The thieves followed him and the bag, stole the bag and hanged the courier in the basement of the hotel. When investigation into the death proved fruitless, officials declared it a suicide and closed the case. The perpetrators were never captured.

The statue was saved and the Embassy sent two couriers, well guarded, to retrieve the Michaelangelo. Since then, it has reposed in the cathedral at St. Alons.

Edith Back

REAL OR FAKE ?

The sculpture traveled from France to the United States accompanied by a number of documents attesting to its authenticity. Among them were letters from notaries such as L. Reau, professor of History of Art at the Sorbonne, President of the Antiquaries of France, Curator of Hermitage Museum at St. Petersburg, and founder of the Art School of Vienna, who wrote in 1939, "The veritable personal characteristics of Michaelangelo so vividly portrayed in this Pieta' prove beyond doubt that it cannot

be the work of any other artist." Others were written by Louis Brehier, Professor of the Academy of Belles-Lettres and of Inscriptions, and Professor of the University of the History of Art; by Raoul Mabru, Professor of Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in 1944; And numerous other European art professors and historians.

One of the documents accompanying the pieta' on its American journey refers to a denial from the Metropolitan Museum of Art that it was a work of Michaelangelo. The writer notes: "I was quite interested in the denial, since according to the governing citizens of Clermont-Ferrand, the Metropolitan Museum of Art had earlier attempted to purchase the statue, but at an unreasonably low rate."

In the Municipal Library of Clermont-Ferrand is an 1831 document from the memoirs of Verdier Latour, a Benedictine monk who listed many art treasures in the St. Alyre Abbey, including "une Vierge de Michaelangelo." The translation reads, "Throughout the centuries the sculpture we [the Cleremont-Ferrand community] have is the only sculpture attributed to Michaelangelo that had ever been in Cleremont-Ferrand and since this Pieta' has never left Cleremont-Ferrand but remained here after the Revolution in a Cleremont-Ferrand family down to the present time, it is without doubt the statue mentioned in the old documents of St. Alyre Abbey and the Municipal Library at Cleremont-Ferrand".

There are other documents

in the possession of Mr. Kearny Robert that have been translated from the French for this Newsletter by Mrs. Emily deMontluzin and Miss Lorraine deMontluzin. Copies in our files are available for inspection in the Lobrano House.

We of the Society offer sincere thanks to Mr. Robert for sharing his precious documents with us, and to the deMontluzin ladies for their translations.

Edith Back

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Thanks to Carter Church and Yancy Pogue who are allowing us to show their new home, *La Marin*, as a fund-raiser for our new auditorium. Also, the RSVP volunteers have been extremely generous in offering their members to work as hostesses. The hours for showing are Thu. thru Sat. 10 to 3, Sundays noon to 3, from Aug. 10 to Aug. 27.

Charles H. Gray

LOBRANO HOUSE HOURS

MON. 8 to 4 or by  
TUE. 8 to 4 appointment  
THU. 8 to 4

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